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Research Note

Where You Sit is Where You Stand: The Impact of Seating Proximity on Legislative Cue-Taking*

Seth E. Masket

Political Science, University of Denver, 471 Sturm Hall, 2000 E. Asbury Avenue, Denver, CO 80208, USA; smasket@du.edu

ABSTRACT

This article builds on Matthews and Stimson's (1975) study of legislative cue-taking, analyzing the extent to which legislators sitting next to each other influence each others' voting behavior. Data come from three decades of roll call votes in the California Assembly, a chamber in which each member is paired with a deskmate. By comparing deskmate pairs with nondeskmate pairs, I find that legislators vote identically to their deskmates on a sizeable subset of roll calls. This deskmate effect appears to remain strong even as a rival influence — legislative partisanship — increases in strength.

A typical state or federal legislator will face hundreds or even thousands of roll call votes during a legislative session, mostly concerning topics on which he/she possesses little or no expertise. As Matthews and Stimson (1975, p. 25) note,

> There are too many decisions to be made across too wide a span of subjects; the issues involved are too complex for quick decision, and there is too little time for anything else. Even so, the congressman must cast his vote in a reasonably rational way or face the possibility of failing to achieve his personal and political objectives.

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So how does the member make up his/her mind? Or, ask Matthews and Stimson, "How would a reasonable congressman decide how to vote on an issue about which he knew and cared very little?" (p. vii). The answer, it seems, is that there is a great deal of cue-taking in a legislature. Members defer in their judgment to trusted colleagues with expertise in particular issue areas. They also take cues from party leaders, the executive branch, committee members, interest groups, and constituents. Such cue-taking seems to be involved in anywhere from a quarter to three-quarters of floor votes cast (p. 60).

The identities of the aforementioned cue-givers are unsurprising. However, Matthews and Stimson's analysis briefly suggests a less formal type of cuing. Some 31 percent of respondents claimed that they relied upon friends in the chamber to instruct their votes. Kingdon (1973) finds an even higher figure; 42 percent of members of Congress surveyed considered their colleagues' input to be of major importance in determining their own voting decisions. The co-sponsorship of legislation is also apparently an important cue that can govern the voting behavior of legislators (Koger 2003, Fowler 2006), as is membership in a legislative caucus (Victor and Ringe 2008). Surprisingly, cue-taking can be even less formal than that. One member of Congress, describing how he/she made up his/her mind on floor voting, said, "You may follow the lead of someone who immediately precedes you in the alphabet" (Matthews and Stimson 1975, p. 53).

We can expect such informal cue-taking to occur when other cue-givers are silent. Such instances are hardly unusual — many issues before a legislature are far too arcane to be of interest to constituents or lobbying groups. Neither the floor party leadership nor the White House will weigh in on all issues, either, since it is a waste of resources to make every vote a test of loyalty. And some issues are simply not partisan ones; legislators may not know how to map a given bill onto the left–right dimension. In such situations, we can expect the less formal cues to dominate.

It is my contention that legislators will turn to those closest to them in deciding on a subset of legislative votes. By "closest to them," I mean geographically: those who sit nearest to them on the chamber floor. I further speculate that the importance of geographical proximity on voting behavior will be greater when other cue-giving is weaker. All this suggests that seating assignments in a legislature may have a substantial impact on that legislature's output.

An episode from the mid-20th century California Assembly provides some evidence of this sort of geographic cue-taking. On May 29, 1949, Howard Cramer, a San Diego Republican, resigned his seat and left the California Assembly. His departure fell at roughly the midpoint of the 1949 legislative session.[1] I ran two separate W-NOMINATE (Poole and Rosenthal 1997) calculations to determine members' ideal points both before and after Cramer's departure. While the ideal points themselves cannot be directly compared from one period to the next, we can rank members ideologically within their time periods.

The roll call votes show that Cramer had been a decidedly moderate member of the Assembly, and that the member who sat closest to him, Republican Francis Lindsey

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[1] By that date, the Assembly had cast 538 of the 1,128 roll calls that they would ultimately cast that year.

of Alpine County, had charted an ideologically similar course while they sat together. Cramer and Lindsey were, respectively, the 38th and 37th most conservative members of the 80-member chamber. Lindsey sat alone after Cramer's departure, and his subsequent behavior is telling; he tacked right, becoming the 29th most conservative member in the chamber. Although it is difficult to know a great deal about these members who served nearly 60 years ago, this evidence suggests that sitting next to Cramer had a moderating effect on Lindsey.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA SELECTION

To be sure, a study on the influence of seating on legislative voting could be done in any legislature. Certain facets of the California Assembly, however, make that chamber an unusually good candidate for such a study. For one thing, the chamber has an odd seating layout, as can be seen in Figure 1. Rather than having equidistant seats on either side of the aisle, seats in the Assembly are paired, with each member sharing an adjoining desk with another.[2] If legislators are going to influence any of their colleagues, they would theoretically influence their deskmates above all others.

Second, as Figure 1 also reveals, seating has not been traditionally done in a purely partisan manner. Typically, state legislatures seat their members as the US Congress does, with all Republicans on one side of an aisle and all Democrats on the other

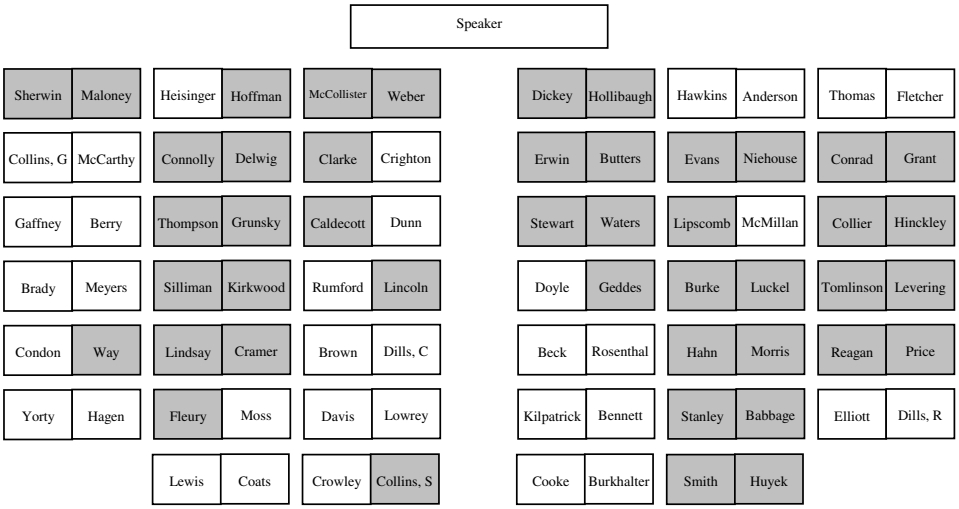

Figure 1. Seating assignments in the 1949 California assembly. Republican members are marked with gray desks, Democratic members are marked with white desks.
Source: *Assembly Final History, 1949 Regular Session*, pp. 30, 31.

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[2] Both the Texas and Michigan lower houses have similar floor seating arrangements.

(Patterson 1972). This has been true for a few years in the California Assembly's history — Speaker Willie Brown (1982–1995) used pure partisan seating in the belief that it fostered party discipline. However, in most years, California Assembly speakers have interspersed Democrats and Republicans all over the floor, although deskmates are often of the same party.

Third, the physical task of legislative voting has been relatively unchanged over the time period under study. The Assembly adopted electronic voting, by which members could cast votes by pressing a button from their desks, in 1935. This system has been upgraded over time, but the style of voting has not changed significantly (Sgromo 2007, Personal Communication).

Fourth, since the major competitor to seatmate influence would seem to be party, California stands out again as a good case study since legislative partisanship has varied so widely in the state's history. I have specifically chosen an era in Assembly history (1941–1975) in which partisanship was notably in flux. The chamber experienced a sizeable jump in legislative polarization in the mid-1950s. This jump was due to an important change in California election law during this time period — the abolition of cross-filing — which encouraged greater party discipline among legislators (Masket 2007).

Systematically measuring the impact of seating proximity on voting presents some challenges. There are very few convenient natural experiments like that of Assemblymembers Cramer and Lindsey — most deskmates start and end their sessions together, making it difficult to use W-NOMINATE scores as a dependent variable. A particular problem lies in the fact that legislators may have been paired up with members they were likely to vote with anyway. This would render the ideal points an endogenous measure, making it impossible for us to tell whether proximity led to similar voting patterns or vice versa. State legislative leaders interviewed for this study rejected ideological similarity as a premise for seating assignments. However, given that those who drew up the seating assignments during the time period under study have long since died, it is impossible to rule this out as a motivation.

A better dependent variable for the purposes of this study is an *agreement score*. Rather than determining how close members are ideologically, an agreement score simply calculates the proportion of votes on which any two members vote identically to each other. This makes for a better dependent variable since we are not necessarily concerned with ideological similarity, and especially since we are concerned with a subset of votes that may not have obvious liberal or conservative positions. In a typical legislature, we can expect agreement scores to be correlated with the distance between ideal points, but they are certainly not the same. If we are trying to examine the personal influence of one legislator over another independent of partisan or ideological persuasion, the agreement score is the better measure.

I created a dataset in which I paired every member up with every other member in the Assembly in each year. I collected biographical information on each member and demographic and electoral information on each district to be able to control for other influences on members. Since the dataset consists of each member paired up against every other member, I use a fixed effects regression analysis, controlling for each legislator.

The independent variables used were as follows:

- *Same county* — A dummy variable that equals one if both members of a pair reside in the same county and zero otherwise.
- *Same region* — A dummy variable that equals one if both members of a pair reside in the same portion of the state (north or south) and zero otherwise.
- *Same party* — A dummy variable that equals one if both members of a pair are of the same party and zero otherwise.
- *Same occupation* — A dummy variable that equals one if both members of a pair hold the same occupation and zero otherwise.
- *District ideological distance* — The difference between both members' districts' Democratic vote for president in the most recent presidential election.
- *Urbanization* — The difference between both members' districts' percent urbanization.[3]
- *Tax burden* — The difference between both members' districts' tax burden to the state.[4]
- *Freshman included* — A dummy variable that equals one if at least one member of a pair was a freshman legislator.
- *Same cohort* — A dummy variable that equals one if both members of a pair were originally elected in the same year.
- *Difference in electoral margins* — The difference in the election margins of the two members in the most recent legislative election.
- *Common committees* — The number of committees on which the two members both serve.

My predictions are as follows:

- Deskmates will tend to vote alike on some subset of bills. That is, they will tend to have higher agreement scores than pairs of legislators who are not deskmates.
- The influence of deskmates on each other's voting behavior will be mitigated by the effect of party. When parties are more internally cohesive, deskmate voting will be weaker.

RESULTS

Before getting into the results of the regression equations, a brief examination of agreement scores in the California Assembly is warranted. Figure 2 displays the average

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[3] This measure was derived from US Census data describing the percentage of residents who lived in urban areas. Since those data were only available by county, I needed to convert it to a district-specific measure by averaging the statistic for each county within a given district.

[4] This measure is the per-capita tax dollars sent to the state. The data were drawn from the *Biennial Report of the State Treasurer* (1902–1944) and the State Controller's *Annual Counties Report* (1956–2002). As with the urbanism variable, this one had to be translated from a county measure to a district one.

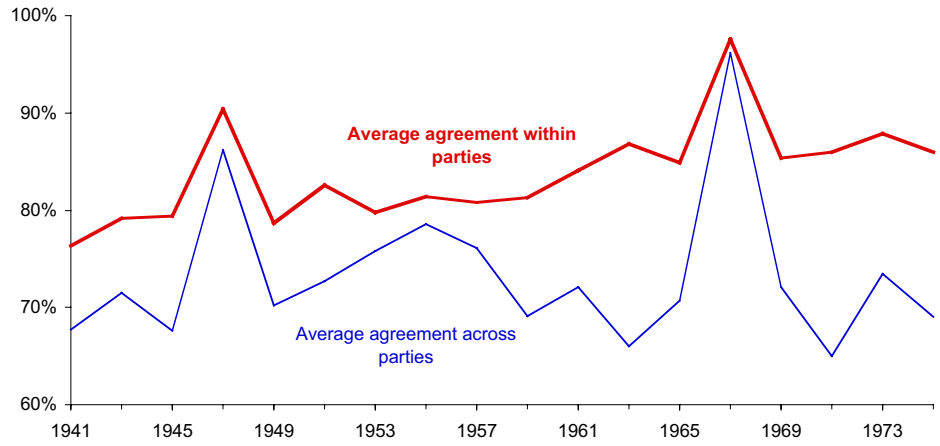

Figure 2. Agreement scores for intraparty and interparty pairs.

agreement scores for all pairs of legislators in each year. The scores are broken down by whether each given pair was of the same political party or not. One of the more striking things is the level of comity within the legislature; the average agreement score was typically upwards of 70 percent during these years. Even among members of different parties, the level of agreement was typically around 70 percent. Much of this apparent harmony can be explained by high numbers of near-unanimous votes (purely unanimous votes have been eliminated from this dataset), but the effect is still striking. By contrast, a similar analysis for the 2001 legislative session showed only 34.6 percent agreement among members of different parties.

Also of note in this graph is a party effect. The difference between in-party voting and cross-party voting roughly doubles over the course of this time frame. Between 1941 and 1959 (the year cross-filing was banned), the average difference between in-party and cross-party agreement scores was 7.4 percent; from 1961 to 1975 it was 14.3 percent. This finding is consistent with the earlier claims that the legislative parties grew more polarized and internally cohesive during this time period.

I now turn to the multivariate regression results. Table 1 reveals the regression coefficients for three of the years under study: 1941, 1957, and 1975. Space does not allow for the presentation of all coefficients for all years, although they are available upon request from the author and can be replicated with the supplementary material. The results from these three sessions, however, allow us to see how some of these demographic and political variables interact with agreement scores.

The first and most important observation is that the deskmates variable is positive and statistically significant ($p \leq 0.01$) in all three sessions, demonstrating that those who sit together tend to vote together two to six percent more often than those who do not sit together, all else being equal. Unsurprisingly, agreement scores tend to be higher

Table 1. OLS regression predicting agreement scores in three sessions

Variable	1941	1957	1975
Constant	0.696***	0.766***	0.690***
	(0.006)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Deskmates	0.049***	0.054***	0.023**
	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Same party	0.080***	0.040***	0.149***
	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Same region	0.018***	0.029***	0.003
	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Same county	−0.001	−0.014***	0.009*
	(0.006)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Same occupation	−0.002	0.003	0.015***
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
District ideological difference (in recent presidential vote)	−0.266***	−0.128***	−0.024
	(0.020)	(0.014)	(0.014)
District difference in degree of urbanization	0.006	−0.035***	0.009
	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.008)
District difference in percentage tax burden to state	−0.002	0.0001	0.000
	(0.027)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Freshman included in pair	0.008*	0.006	0.027***
	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.002)
Same cohort	0.009**	−0.002	0.005
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Difference in election margins	−0.045***	0.016*	−0.062***
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.012)
Number of common committees	0.022***	0.003	−0.002
	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.003)
R-squared	0.312	0.184	0.600
N	3,081	2,954	3,002

Notes: Dependent variable is the percent of roll call votes on which each pair of members voted identically. Cell entries are regression coefficients, with a fixed-effects specification controlling for individual members. Standard errors appear in parentheses. Asterisks indicate statistical significance ($^{*}p \leq 0.05$; $^{**}p \leq 0.01$; $^{***}p \leq 0.001$).

among pairs from the same party and among pairs from the same region of the state. Those whose districts vote very differently also tend to agree less on the chamber floor. Additionally, pairs containing a freshman member tend to experience higher agreement scores, suggesting that new members are more likely to follow the lead of veterans.

Figure 3 shows graphically the deskmates coefficient as it varies over time. Each coefficient is depicted with a 95 percent confidence interval band.

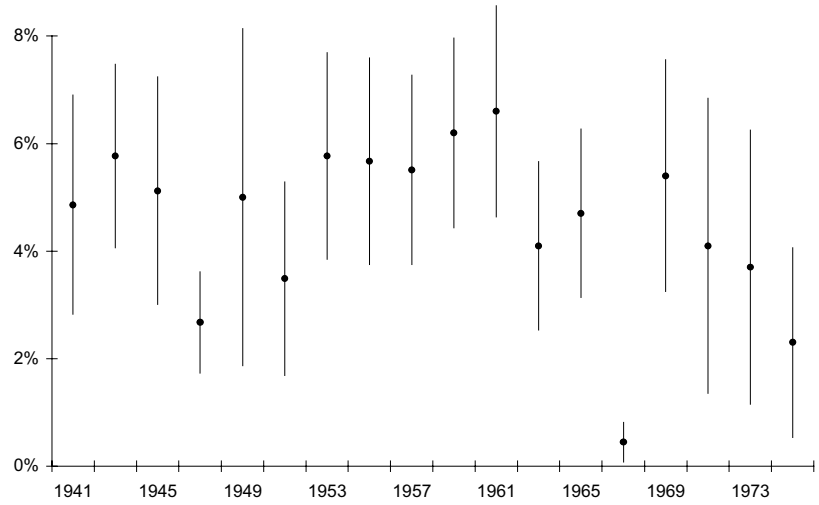

Figure 3. Average effect of deskmates on agreement scores.
Notes: Bands indicate 95% confidence intervals. In no case does a band cross the zero line, indicating that all coefficients are statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$).

Two points are immediately obvious:

1. There is a seating proximity effect. In none of these years does the confidence interval band cross the zero line, indicating that every deskmate coefficient here is statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$). Pairs of legislators who share a desk have significantly higher agreement scores than pairs who do not share a desk. This effect hovers between four and six percent, although it goes as high as seven and falls below one. It appears to be quite common for members to take cues from their deskmates in deciding their votes on a subset of roll calls.
2. The seating effect varies a great deal but not in any consistent temporal pattern. There is little to suggest that the deskmate effect dissipates as parties become more internally cohesive, which they did in the California Assembly in the 1960s and 1970s.

The lack of pattern may be explained by a confounding factor: the proportion of votes that are lopsided. Matthews and Stimson found that the applicability of their cue-taking model varied significantly with the size of the voting majority on a given congressional vote. There is also going to be a ceiling on the influence of seating proximity as a roll call's vote share approaches unanimity. A study of voting within the 1957 session, in which I broke down the average influence of the deskmates condition on agreement scores at different sizes of majority votes on roll calls, confirms this suspicion. Although the deskmates effect for all of 1957 is 5.5 percent, that figure is roughly doubled for the more contested votes (with less than 70 percent of the chamber voting in the majority). The effect tapers off as majority size increases, but is still near eight percent for votes on which

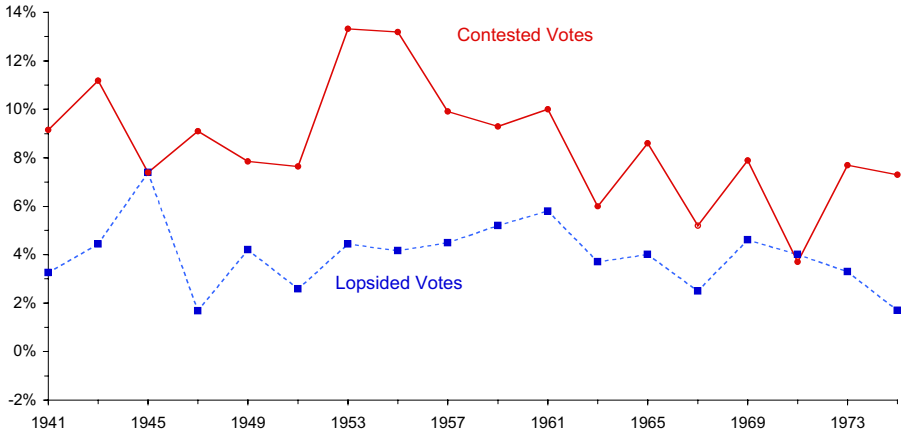

Figure 4. Average effect of deskmates on agreement scores for contested and lopsided roll calls.
Notes: Solid points indicate statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$) coefficients. Hollow points indicate nonsignificant coefficients. Contested votes are those votes in which less than 65 percent of the chamber votes in the majority.

80 to 90 percent of the chamber was in the majority. The effect nearly disappears during near-unanimous votes. This suggests that the growth in the number of near-unanimous votes during this time period could be obscuring important changes in the deskmates effect.

In Figure 4, I have calculated the deskmates effect for both contested and lopsided votes. For these purposes, contested votes are those in which less than 65 percent of the chamber votes in the majority. All other votes are categorized as lopsided. The 65 percent figure is admittedly an arbitrary one, although it is the same demarcation that Snyder and Groseclose (2000) use in their study of party influence within the Congress. In the figure, solid points are statistically significant at the $p \leq 0.05$ level, while hollow points are nonsignificant.

The lopsided votes do not tell much of a story — the effect they show mainly hovers between four and five percent, although it is statistically significant in all years. The contested votes, however, reveal an even stronger deskmate influence than detected earlier. The effect is often in excess of eight percent and occasionally approaches 14 percent, and this effect is statistically significant in all but one year.[5] Also of interest is

[5] It is difficult to say why the year 1967 should have such a low deskmates coefficient. It was a somewhat unusual year for the California Assembly in that it had a record number of freshmen and that there was a narrow Democratic majority trying to work with a Republican governor. This was also the year that Speaker Jesse Unruh pushed through his proposals to professionalize the legislature, increasing salaries and lengthening sessions. These factors might tend to dissuade deskmate voting, but the complete collapse of the measure here is nonetheless surprising.

that the deskmate influence does not seem to vary with partisan polarization. It tapers off slightly in the latter years but is still near eight percent in the final two sessions. Interestingly, the deskmate effect is consistently above eight percent from 1953 through 1961, a time period when the legislative parties were polarizing and becoming more internally coherent. This eight-to-fourteen percent figure is an impressively large figure given that, as Figure 2 demonstrated, the average difference between in-party and cross-party agreement scores was approximately seven percent during the same time period.

One concern about the regression model used here is that agreement scores are highly correlated with the distance between NOMINATE ideal points. Thus the model could still be subject to the endogeneity problem; members could have been seated together because they seemed to have similar ideological dispositions. To compensate for this, I ran the same models, only I included the first and second dimension DW-NOMINATE scores[6] for each member as control variables, functionally stripping the agreement scores of their ideological content. Nonetheless, I found the same patterns in the data. The deskmate coefficients were reduced slightly, but they were nonetheless statistically significant in all but one year.

DISCUSSION

This paper has shown that legislative cue-taking may occur at a very informal level and still have an impact on legislative voting behavior. To be sure, the effect of such cues does not rival that described by Young (1966) in the early American Congress, in which members voted in lockstep with their messmates for fear of social ostracism (although see Bogue and Marlaire (1975)). Nor should we expect cue-taking to be quite so influential in a modern American legislature; political institutions have matured, parties have grown stronger, and the electoral connection has flourished, although members of Congress still sometimes share apartments to save on expenses (Marsh 2002).

Nonetheless, the influence of legislators upon each other continues. Although it is difficult to be certain how much this seating effect ultimately affects the legislative outcomes of a chamber, this paper has shown that such an effect exists at the individual level and is surprisingly robust to other sources of influence, such as legislative parties. Given the range of potential informal influences legislators encounter — including shared office space with other legislators, friendship networks, alumni associations, prayer groups, social clubs, etc. — informal cues could potentially rival or even surpass the more formal cues, such as party leaders and executive branch missives, that have drawn so much attention from political scientists. Such informal influences on legislative voting certainly merit further study.

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[6] I received critical assistance from Keith Poole and Jeffrey Lewis in calculating these scores. This data collection effort was largely funded by the National Science Foundation, grant number 0214514.

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